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ON THE

ORIGIN OF ROMANTIC FABLING IN IRELAND.

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To trace the origin of romantic fabling, in modern Europe, would be a curious, and, perhaps, not a fruitless enquiry. In proportion as the literary treasures of the East shall be opened and displayed, the means of acquiring information, on this interesting subject, will, probably, be increased. It would seem, that the magicians, knights, and damsels, with which Fairy-land is peopled, owed their birth, to the warm fancy of the Oriental romance-writers. Through what channels, the fictions of the East found their way into Europe, may be conjectured, but cannot be positively determined. To the time of the Crusades, their introduction is generally referred. I think, however, that the commercial intercourse, which formerly subsisted, between the Levant, and some of the principal Italian states, opened a channel, equally wide, and certainly more secure. The tumultuous crowd, that rushed to the rescue

of the Holy Sepulchre, had not, probably, either leisure or inclination for mental gratifications. In the acquisition of spoils, they seem to have rather exercised their prowess, than their taste. But, we will not weary ourselves with conjecture, in regard to the medium, through which those fictions flowed into Europe; it is enough, for our present purpose, that we not only find them there, during the middle ages, but can trace them, in some of the popular romances of that period. Ariosto supplies us with an instance in point. The story of Schariar and his brother, in the Arabian Nights Entertainments, evidently appears to have laid the foundation for the well-known tale of Astolpho and Jocundo, in Canto XXVIII. of the Orlando Furioso.* I am, I will confess, inclined to consider Italy, as the great emporium of the fictions under consideration. And as the monks of that delightful region, as well as those of France, occasionally relaxed from their severer studies, in excursions to Fairy-land, the Oriental fictions might, through their means, have spread to the neighbouring countries. Some of the early romances, as well as the legends of saints, were undoubtedly fabricated, in the deep silence of the cloister.† Both frequently sprung from the warmth of fancy, which religious seclusion

* Hole's Arthur, pref. p. viii.

† Vid. Ritson's Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy, prefixed to Ancient English Metrical Romances, Vol. I. See, also, the elegant and accurate Mr. Ellis's Historical Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the English Poetry and Language, prefixed to Specimens of the Early English Poets.

sion is so well calculated to nourish; but the former were adorned with foreign embellishments.

While the See of Rome was fostering, with anxious solicitude, the Catholic church in Ireland, missionaries were occasionally sent, from the several monastic foundations on the Continent, to regulate the ritual; and, at the same time, to invigorate superstition, by furnishing fresh supplies of holy legends. Amongst these, it may be presumed, some of the profane romances, fabricated in the Continental cloisters, were introduced (perhaps we might say smuggled) into this country. And, as the brilliant fictions of the East were the elements, of which those romances were chiefly composed, they thus obtained a footing in Ireland, and furnished materials for the metrical tales of our early bards.* To the stock of materials thus supplied, were, probably,

* Availing myself of the privilege of a note, I shall embrace this occasion, to observe, that the splendour of the provincial Irish courts, at a very remote period, which strikes and astonishes us, in some of our historians, (particularly Keating,) borrowed, in all probability, a good deal of their lustre, from the romances alluded to in the text. Wanting the assistance of authentic documents, our historians have been tempted to fill up the void, with materials, drawn from the historical tales of the bards; and have thus been unconsciously led to ascribe, to the ancient Irish, the customs and manners of the East; forgetting they were only employed by the bards as poetical embellishments. Hence, the romantic air, which our early history wears.—I hope my candour, on this occasion, will not be mistaken for retraction. Although my crude productions, on the subjects of the history and antiquities of Ireland, glow with all the warmth of youthful enthusiasm, it will not, I trust, be found, that I was led into wilful misrepresentation. I may have inadvertently erred; but my authorities are before the public.

probably, added many Moorish and Arabian fables, and Spanish Historias de Cavallerias, which might have found their way to the western coast of this island, by means of the commercial intercourse, which subsisted so early, and so long, between Spain and Galway.*

" A very gallant gentleman, of the North of Ireland," (says Sir William Temple,) " has told me, of his own ex-
" perience, that, in his wolf-huntings there, when he used to
" be abroad in the mountains three or four days together,
" and lay very ill a-nights, so as he could not well sleep,
" they would bring him one of the tale-tellers, that, when
" he lay down, would begin a story of a king, or a gyant,
" a dwarf, and a damsel, and such rambling stuff; and
" continue it all night long, in such an even tone, that
" you heard it going on whenever you awaked."† Now, as giants, dwarfs, and damsels, are topics, in which the Eastern romances are very conversant, we can be at no loss to discover the source, whence they flowed into Ireland,‡ though

* The Irish prose romances of the middle ages, seem, in general, to have been constructed, on the Spanish model: at least, such of them, as have met my observation, were interspersed with poetical pieces, like the Historia de las Civiles Guerras de Granada.

† Miscel. Essay IV.

‡ Pharroh, (or, as the name was sometimes written, Forroch or Ferragh,) a giant, evidently of Eastern extraction, was the subject of a war-song, in use amongst the Irish kerns; and a name of terror in the armies of the early Irish. Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards, p. 96. It is a curious fact, that we find a Sir Ferragh among the knights of Ariosto; who, certainly, cannot be suspected of having borrowed, either the name or the hero, from the Irish bards.

though we cannot determine, with certainty, the medium through which they passed. But I shall now proceed to adduce a few instances, in support of my hypothesis.

The similitude, between the pathetic Irish tale of Conloch, and the story of Rustam, as related by the Persian poet, Ferdusi, in his heroic poem, entitled Shah Nameh, is almost too strong to admit of its being supposed accidental. "Ferdusi relates," (I borrow the words of the ingenious Sir William Ouseley,) "that, after a sumptuous feast, "and magnificent entertainment, given, in honour of Rus- "tam, by the king of Sitemgam, to which wine and music "contributed all their charms, a couch or bed being care- "fully prepared for the Persian hero, (Rustam,) he retired "to rest; and, after a short time, was astonished at the ap- "pearance of a lovely damsel, who advanced from behind "the curtains and hangings." After a glowing description of the personal charms of the damsel, and a relation of the particulars of her conversation, with the hero, Sir William proceeds. "Of this mysterious interview, and "the subsequent union of our hero with the princess, "the result was a son, whom the king, her father, edu- "cated, after Rustam's departure, and called by the name "of Sohraub. The youth, having learned from his mo- "ther, the strange circumstances of his birth, and of "Rustam's fame, resolved to set out, in quest of adven- "tures, and immediately commenced a series of brave "and gallant actions. But being so unfortunate, as to "encounter his own father, each ignorant of his relation

"to

" to the other, the issue of the combat proved fatal to " Sohraùb; who did not, however, expire, until it was " discovered that he fell by a parent's hand. The circum- " stances attending this discovery, the dying words, and " filial affection, of the ill-fated youth, and the father's " vehement affliction and distress, afford the poet, Ferdusi, " a fine subject, for many interesting and beautiful pas- " sages."*

Of the Irish tale, I shall now give the outlines, illustrated with extracts, from the very elegant and spirited version of Miss Brooke.† Conloch, " haughty, bold, and " brave,"

> Came to visit Erin's coast;
> Came to prove her mighty host!

Finding the Finian chiefs assembled, on some particular occasion, he hurls defiance at them, and

> While he spoke, collecting all his might,
> Fierce he addrest his conquering arms to fight;
> No stop, no stay, his furious faulchion found,
> Till his dire hand an hundred warriors bound:
> Vanquish'd, they sunk beneath his dreadful sway,
> And low on earth their bleeding glories lay.

A messenger

* Persian Miscellanies, p. 95, 97, 115.

† Reliques of Irish Poetry, p. 9—31; a work, of which Ireland has reason to be proud.

A messenger is then dispatched for Cucullin. He arrives, and challenges Conloch to single combat; but first requests he will

> To him his purpose and his name confide,
> And what his lineage and his land declare.

To this requisition, Conloch gives an unwilling refusal. He knows he is about to raise his arm against a parent; but his honour, as a knight, will not allow him to decline the combat, or declare his name.

> Reluctant, then, the chiefs commenc'd the fight,
> Till glowing honor rous'd their slumbering might!
> Dire was the strife each valiant arm maintain'd,
> And undecided long their fates remain'd;
> For, till that hour, no eye had ever view'd
> A field so fought, a conquest so pursu'd!
> At length Cucullin's kindling soul arose;
> Indignant shame recruited fury lends;
> With fatal aim his glittering lance he throws,
> And low on earth the dying youth extends.

Conloch, feeling the approach of death, addresses Cucullin, in the following pathetic terms.

> Approach!—the wounded youth reply'd,—
> Yet,—yet more closely nigh!
> On this dear earth,—by that dear side,
> O let me die!—

Thy hand,—my father,—hapless chief!—
And you, ye warriors of our isle, draw near,
The anguish of my soul to hear,
For I must kill a father's heart with grief.*

As this passage (a passage not inferior, perhaps, to any of those passages in the Shah Nameh, alluded to by Sir William Ouseley) exhibits a fine subject for the pencil, I shall submit it to the contemplation of the Academy; while I proceed to the relation of another Irish tale, which bears evident marks of an Oriental origin. The tale in question, is entitled, Moira Borb; of which also Miss Brooke has given a translation.

While the Finian chiefs range carelessly along the banks of the fierce Mac-bovar, or river Erne, which, in its fall, near Ballyshannon, occasions the celebrated salmon-leap, they are surprised, by the appearance of a lovely damsel, in an enchanted bark. The damsel lands, and is courteously received by the chiefs; who, observing her trembling apprehensions, enquire into the cause. She relates her story.

O! I am follow'd o'er the rolling wave!
O! mighty Finn! thy trembling suppliant save!
The son of Sora's king with wrath pursues,
The chief of spears, whose arm the host subdues!

While

* After reading this passage, we cannot wonder, that Spenser should declare, that the poems of the Irish bards "savoured of sweet wit and good "invention."

While she speaks, a mighty warrior appears, riding over the waves, upon a magic steed. Reaching the shore, he rushes forward, and seizes the trembling damsel. A combat ensues, between him and the Finian chiefs, in which he falls; and, immediately after, receives sepulchral honours. The maid continues in the camp. Miss Brooke concludes, from the following passage in the poem, that the story does not end here.

> Woe to the champions of that lovely dame!
> Woe to the land, to which her beauty came!

On these lines, she observes, in a note, " It is probable, " that this passage alludes to some subsequent conse- " quences of the death of Moira-borb." It may, therefore, be presumed, that the heroine of this poem was, like the Armida of Tasso,* a deceitful damsel, whose object was, to seduce some of the Finian chiefs from their duty; and destroy or enervate them, by female wiles, and the power of enchantment. Indeed, I am inclined to think, that the Italian and the Irish bards drew the materials, of which their respective tales are composed, from the same source. The similitude is certainly striking. That Tasso never saw the Irish tale, is highly probable;† and, if he

 had

* Gerusal. Liberata, Canto IV.

† It cannot be safely asserted, that the metrical tales of the Irish were known on the Continent; but it is an undoubted fact, that the Irish bards not only imitated, but sometimes translated, the French and Italian romances. An Irish version of Huon de Bourdeaux still exists. It may, however, be supposed, that the translations and imitations, to which I allude, were subsequent

had seen it, he undoubtedly could not have read it: yet, it may be presumed, it was written before he was born. Miss Brooke, on the presumptive evidence of the language, refers it to the middle ages. If, therefore, it supplied Tasso with a foundation for his beautiful episode of Armida, he must have found it in some other language; and, perhaps, under some other form. Without meaning, however, to insist on the probability of my conjecture, I shall exhibit a few parallel passages, from the two poems, and leave the reader to decide.

All' apparir della beltà novella
Nasce un bisbiglio, e'l guardo ogn'un v'intende;
Siccome là, dove Cometa, o Stella
Non più vista di giorno in ciel risplende:
E traggon tutti per veder chi sia
Sì bella pellegrina, e chi l'invia.

Argo non mai, non vide Cipro, o Delo
D'abito, o di beltà forme sì care.

Her matchless charms the wond'ring bands surprize,
Provoke their whispers, and attract their eyes;
So mortals, through the midnight fields of air,
Observe the blaze of some unusual star.
Sudden they throng to view th' approaching dame,
Eager to learn her message, and her name.
Not Argos, Cyprus, or the Delian coast, &c. HOOLE.

And,

sequent to the time of Spenser; else he would not have omitted to notice them, in his very curious and interesting account of the Irish Bards; an order of men, whose "history" (as Dr. Brown justly observes) "is, perhaps, "of all others, the most extraordinary."

And, oh, to tell the charms her form array'd!
The winning sweetness that her face display'd!
On her alone we could or think or gaze,
And our rapt souls were lost in sweet amaze. MOIRA-BORB.

Stassi l'avaro sguardo in sè raccolto,
E i tesori d'Amore, e i suoi nasconde.*

Declin'd on earth, her modest look denies,
To shew the starry lustre of her eyes. HOOLE.

Deck'd by soft love, with sweet attractive grace,
And all the charms of mind-illumin'd face;
Before our host the beauteous stranger bow'd,
And, thrown to earth, her eyes their glories shroud. MOIRA-BORB.

Donna,

.
.
.

Che da te si ricerca? e donde viensi?
Qual tua ventura, o nostra, or quì ti mena?

Say,

* This passage is rendered less elegantly, but more faithfully, by Mr. Doyne,—

Her spareful eyes, their brightest beams retain'd;
Love's treasure, and her own, were there conceal'd.

Doyne's translation of the Gerusalemme Liberata, which was once much read and admired, at least for its fidelity, seems to be now almost totally unknown. It is very extraordinary, however, that it should have escaped the notice of Mr. Hoole. Philip Doyne was an Irish gentleman, of taste, talents, and erudition. While he was a student in the College of Dublin, he distinguished himself by some poetical exercises. He afterwards undertook, with the assistance of his Italian master, Signor Palermo, a translation of Tasso's noble poem, in blank verse, which was published by Ewing, in 1761, in two volumes octavo. He died soon after.

Say, damsel!—
What fortune bids thee to our camp repair?
What fortune sends to us a form so fair?
What art thou? HOOLE.

Soft mariner! (the son of Cumhal cry'd,)
What chance has torn thee from protection's side?
Why com'st thou here, and from what happy earth?
And whose the noble race that gave thee birth? MOIRA-BORB.

Il tuo lodar troppo alto sale;
Nè tanto insuso il merto nostro arriva.
Cosa vedi, signor, non pur mortale,
Ma già morta ai diletti, al duol sol viva.
Mia sciagura mi spinge in loco tale,
Vergine pellegrina, e fuggitiva.
Ricorro al pio Goffredo, e in lui confido:
Tal va di sua bontate intorno il grido.

Too far thy praise extends, (she made reply,)
My merits ne'er attain'd a flight so high.
Thy eyes, O chief! a mortal wretch survey,
To pleasure dead, to grief a living prey!
Unhappy fate my footsteps hither led,
A fugitive forlorn, a wand'ring maid!
Godfrey I seek, on him my hopes depend,
Oppression's scourge, and injur'd virtue's friend. HOOLE

Truth, O great chief! my artless story frames:
A mighty king my filial duty claims.
But princely birth no safety could bestow;
And, royal as I am, I fly from woe.

Long have I look'd, that mighty arm to see,
Which is alone of force to set me free;

To

To Erin's far fam'd chief for aid I fly,
And on that aid my trembling hopes rely. MOIRA-BORB.

But I shall not multiply quotations. Unwilling to trespass too long on the patience of the Academy, I shall adduce but a single instance more, in support of my position. The story of the Ring, as related by Trissino, in the Italia Liberata,* and by the author of the Irish poem of the Chase, seem to bear so close an affinity to each other, that, it may be presumed, they were raised upon the same foundation. But that foundation lies, and will, probably, ever lie, "hid in night." In both tales, we may discover the colouring of magic, with which the Saracens of the middle ages, then adepts in chemistry, tinctured all the fables, which sprung from their brilliant and creative imaginations.

Belisarius, having ordered out a detachment of his army, to watch the motions of the enemy, the warriors are met, at the entrance of the camp, by

Una donzella
Tanto leggiadra, e graziosa in vista,
Ch' arebbe accesa ogni gelata mente:
Ben' era piena di fallaci inganni.

This damsel, who appears "sconcolata e mesta," says, sighing, to the admiring chiefs,

Voi mi parete Cavalieri eccelsi,
Di gran valore, e di pietade adorni;

Però

* Lib. IV.

Però prendo ardimento di pregarvi,
Che m' ajutate in questo mio bisogno.
Io fui figliuola già d' una gran donna,
Signora del paese di Bitonte,
Che maritommi al Duca di Crotone,
E diedemi per dote un solo anello
Di pregio estremo, e di valore immenso:
Questo avea tal virtù, che s' io il basciava,
E poi toccava ogni qualunque cosa,
Quella si convertiva in seta, o in oro,
O in tutto quel, ch' i' avea dentr' al pensiero.
Or' io tornando al dolce mio terreno,
Per rivedere i miei, con questo anello,
Ch' io nol lasciava mai da me lontano;
Passai vicina ad una bella fonte;
E veduta, ch' io l' ebbi, ivi discesi
Per bere, e l' anel presi, e lo basciai,
Volendo farmi un' ottima bevanda:
Ma mentre che volea toccar con esso
L' acqua del fonte, e trarmi ivi la sete,
Mi sopravenne un Cavalier armato
Con dui giganti; e con orribil voce
Sì mi sgridaro, ch' io lasciai l' anello
Cadermi per timor nella fontana:
Poi quei crudeli mi tiraro indietro,
Nè voller più, ch' io, m' appressasse ad essa;
Ond' io, per non lasciar sì ricca gioja,
Quì mi rimasi, e vo cercando ajuto:
E s' alcun mi sarà tanto cortese,
Ch' atterri il Cavaliere, ond' io racquisti
La mia sì cara, e prezioso gemma;
I' sarò più di lui, che di me stessa,

Yielding to her requisition, the chiefs attend her to the lake or fountain, where they find an armed knight, the son of an enchantress, ready to receive them. They engage in combat with him. They are vanquished, and led away prisoners to the palace of the enchantress, under the guard of the two giants mentioned by the artful damsel. It is not necessary, for our present purpose, to relate the adventures which followed; I shall only observe, that the waters of the fountain, into which the damsel pretended she had dropped her ring, were endued with miraculous powers.

Chiunque beve
Di sì dolce acqua, tutto si risana;
Onde è detta la fonte del Sanajo.

Let us now turn to the Irish tale.*

During a feast, given in the hall of Almhain to the Finian chiefs, Finn steals from the festive board "to breathe "the fragrant gale." An enchanted doe suddenly appears before him. He calls his dogs, and pursues her to Slieve-Guillin, where she instantly vanishes. Finn then looking around, discovers, near a small lake,

A weeping fair,
Upon a bank reclin'd,
In whose fine form, and graceful air,
Was every charm combin'd.

 The

* Reliques of Irish Poetry, page 73.

The chief approaches the fair mourner, and addresses her,

Hast thou, sweet maid! of golden hair!
Beheld my hounds in chase?

She replies,

Thy chase, O king, was not my care;
I nothing of it know;
Far other thoughts my bosom share,
The thoughts, alas, of woe!

* * *

Alas, my ring, for whose dear sake
These ceaseless tears I shed,
Fell from my finger, in the lake,
(The soft-hair'd virgin said.)

Let me conjure thee, generous king!
Compassionate as brave,
Find for me now my beauteous ring,
That fell beneath the wave.

The tale proceeds:

Scarce was the soft entreaty made,
Her treasure to redeem,
When his fair form he disarray'd,
And plung'd into the stream.

At the white-handed fair's request,
Five times the lake he try'd;
On ev'ry side his search address'd,
Till he the ring descry'd.

But

But when he sought the blooming maid,
  Her treasure to restore;
His powers were gone,—he scarce could wade
  To reach the distant shore!

That form, where strength and beauty met,
  To conquer or engage,
Paid, premature, its mournful debt,
  To grey and palsied age.

Finn is soon afterwards found by his chiefs, in the state described by the poet. They draw the enchantress from a cave, in which she had concealed herself, and oblige her, by threats, to disenchant their leader. She presents him with a medicated cup. He drinks, and immediately

His former grace,
  His former powers return'd;
Again with beauty glow'd his face,
  His breast with valour burn'd.

I shall now conclude. I have not the vanity to think, that I have established my hypothesis; but, I flatter myself, I have thrown out a hint, which may lead to a curious and interesting investigation by some abler hand.

POSTSCRIPT.

Since writing the above slight essay, it has occurred to me, that it might be observed that the story of Armida originates from that of Circe. I grant it might, with much appearance of probability, be traced to that source,—the fountain whence the Alcina of Ariosto, and the Acrasia of Spencer sprung. But circumstances may be found, in the story of Armida, and in the tale of Moira-Borb, which Homer certainly did not supply, and which may be discovered in the Oriental writers. I do not, however, insist on my hypothesis. I merely throw out a hint for investigation.—I might have urged the probability of the Irish bards being descendants of an Oriental colony; and inheriting, of course, the inventive faculties peculiar to the East: but I have studiously avoided every assertion, or conjecture, that could lead to controversy. I have no system to support.

END OF VOL. X.